

Kruger, continued

With South Africa back on the radar for UK travellers, this safari star is ready to shine once again, writes **Mark Eveleigh**

I gaze down over the edge of the bridge to watch a small pod of hippos wallowing in the shallows of the Sabie River. A few crocs bask on the waterline like beached logs, and farther up the riverbank I can see a couple of 'dagga boy' buffaloes ponderously chewing the cud.

The railway bridge I'm standing on has been a fixture of the Kruger wilderness since before South Africa's first national park was even declared in 1927. It is said that the official visitor book for that first year listed a grand total of 27 names. Things have changed since then and, in the years prior to the pandemic, Kruger received almost two million visitors each year.

SAFARI STAYS

This immense park – about the size of Wales – offers arguably a greater range of accommodation to suit all budgets than any other protected area in Africa. The bridge I'm standing on, for example, is now the location of one of Kruger's most luxurious lodges. Yet it is just a stone's throw from sprawling Skukuza

Rest Camp, which boasts six guest houses, 229 bungalows, space for more than 300 tents, and even a golf course and cricket pitch.

In December 2020, a series of sumptuous suites were put on the bridge, which last saw a service trundling across it in 1973, to create new lodge Kruger Shalati: The Train on the Bridge.

The fact that the walkways run along the outside of the train, rather than eating up valuable interior space, means this is probably the most spacious track-top accommodation on the planet. In fact, with a king-sized bed, a picture-window bathtub and an open balcony, it seemed impossible that my suite could actually be a refurbished railway carriage. And the bonus of a train that doesn't move is you never lose sight of this view – even at a standstill, it would be hard to find a better scene anywhere in Africa.

Almost all the Kruger Shalati staff are from the local community and the property has served as a crucial source of employment during the quiet Covid period.

Despite the feeling of exclusivity, this concession ➤

DESTINATIONS

AFRICA | KRUGER

WHERE TO stay

AndBeyond Ngala Tented Camp

is an exclusive camp located on an unfenced private concession right next to Kruger. Highlights of this Timbavati area are its famous white lions. Rates start from £512 per night all-inclusive, based on two sharing. andbeyond.com

Garonga Safari Camp is a beautifully designed camp in a big five private reserve at the western edge of Greater Kruger. Nightly rates start at £380 on an all-inclusive basis, including game drives and a chance to sleep under the stars in the wonderful treehouse. garonga.com

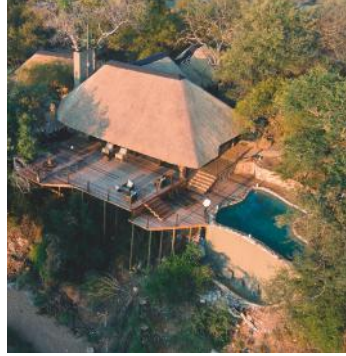
Kruger Shalati: The Train on the Bridge is Kruger's newest – and perhaps most evocative – designer lodge. Accommodation is in beautifully renovated railway carriages on a bridge over the Sabie River. From £392 per person, per night, all-inclusive. krugershalati.com

MalaMala (pictured) has been a popular choice with safari devotees for decades. It is arguably the best place on the planet to see leopards in the wild. From £790 per night, all-inclusive, with some of the world's best big five wildlife viewing. malamala.com



WILD CARDS

If you're spending more than a week in Kruger, or visiting more than one park, a South African National Park 'Wild Card' is a cost-effective option. These cards, covering discounted access to 80-plus national parks and reserves, are available for individuals, couples and families.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Garonga Main Lodge; leopard; MalaMala safari group and a family of lions PICTURES: Mark Eveleigh



is a tiny one in comparison with many other properties in Greater Kruger. MalaMala has become almost a household name in the safari industry since it opened over 90 years ago, and a drop in room rates during the pandemic has meant that many South Africans have grabbed a rare opportunity to experience one of the world's greatest big five areas.

WILD WORLD

Before arriving in Kruger I had wondered what changes might have been wrought among wildlife in the so-called 'anthropause', when the Kruger bush was suddenly left almost entirely devoid of visitors. It seemed, however, that even throughout South Africa's strictest lockdowns, properties made concerted efforts to keep vehicles moving so that animals remained habituated to visitors.

Returning once the travel ban had ended, I realised that even the typically elusive predators seemed more relaxed than they had ever been in the presence of humans. Over the course of just four game drives at MalaMala I saw no fewer than six leopards.

"If there's been anything positive in this at all," one ranger pointed out, "It's that the animals and the landscape have enjoyed a well-earned break from the human traffic."

For some of Kruger's premier wildlife areas, the lockdown proved to be a fruitful time for promotion,

“Many South Africans have rediscovered what is special and unique about their wildernesses

which helped to strengthen Kruger's position as a major brand in the safari industry.

MalaMala's rangers honed their video skills on solo drives, reaching upwards of 200,000 viewers on YouTube. Not far north, in the Timbavati Game Reserve, andBeyond Ngala became well known among millions for the part it played in WildEarth productions.

Now, properties throughout Greater Kruger are looking forward to welcoming fresh influxes of international visitors. The past two years have been a period of introspection and experimentation for most of Kruger's camps and lodges, but there is a definite feeling of optimism these days.

Many South Africans have had an opportunity to rediscover so much that is special and unique about their wildernesses, and as international visitors seek the obvious benefits of a safari – open spaces, fewer crowds and the sense of adventure they've been missing for so long – there is a feeling that Kruger will be going from strength to strength. **TW**